SOME PHASES OF FREE THOUGHT IN ENGLAND IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

THE ESSEX HALL LECTURE, 1925,

BY

THE EARL OF OXFORD AND ASQUITH, K.G.

DA
533
08
1925
GTU
Storage

THE LINDSEY PRESS
5 Essex Street, Strand, London, W.C. 2
1925

CE 1s. 6d. NET.

BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA

THE GIFT OF

Lindsey Press

SOME PHASES OF FREE THOUGHT IN ENGLAND IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

THE ESSEX HALL LECTURE, 1925,

BY
THE EARL OF OXFORD AND ASQUITH, K.G.

THE LINDSEY PRESS
5 Essex Street, Strand, London, W.C. 2
1925

DA
533
O8
1925

Printed in Great Britain by
ELSOM & CO., LTD. HULL

PREFACE

THE Essex Hall Lecture was founded by the British and Foreign Unitarian Association in order to provide an opportunity for a public utterance on a subject of fundamental religious importance by a selected speaker, with entire freedom of treatment.

Among the lecturers in past years have been the Rev. J. Estlin Carpenter, D.D., on "The Relation of Jesus to his Age and Our Own"; the late Professor Sir Henry Jones on "The Immortality of the Soul in the Poems of Tennyson and Browning"; the Rev. W. R. Inge, D.D., Dean of St. Paul's, on "The Religious Philosophy of Plotinus and some Modern Philosophies of Religion"; Dr. Claude G. Montefiore on "The Place of Judaism among the Religions of the World"; the Rev. Charles Gore, D.D., late Bishop of Oxford, on "Christianity applied to the life of Men and Nations"; Dr. L. P. Jacks, Editor of *The Hibbert Journal*, on "The Lost Radiance of the Christian Religion"; and the Rt. Hon. Viscount Cecil on "The Moral Basis of the League of Nations."

The present lecture by the Earl of Oxford and Asquith, K.G., was much appreciated by the large audience which heard it, and it is believed that a wider public will read it with interest and profit.

S. H. MELLONE.

ESSEX HALL, LONDON.

22877

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2026

https://archive.org/details/somephaseoffreet0000unse

SOME PHASES OF FREE THOUGHT IN ENGLAND IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

I ACCEPTED the invitation to deliver this lecture on the assurance that though our meeting is held under the auspices of the British and Foreign Unitarian Association we are here to-day on entirely undenominational ground. I have chosen as my topic a subject which is of purely historical significance, but which presents aspects that ought still to have a living interest for men of all parties and creeds.

I must at the outset correct a misapprehension which might naturally arise from the unduly ambitious title under which I have authorized the lecture to be announced. It ought to read " Some Phases of Free Thought in England in the nineteenth century." To attempt, even in outline, to sketch the development of intellectual freedom in the nineteenth century would be to undertake a task far beyond my powers in any case, and incapable of compression by anybody within the limits of one brief discourse. My object is the more modest one of dealing with one or two phases only of the new contributions which, under the stimulus of free inquiry and open debate, England made

during that century to the intellectual wealth of the world.

Let me make one further preliminary reservation. I have purposely ruled out of the ambit of my survey the theological area—not because in this connection it lacks interest or importance; it is abundantly charged with both; but because it cannot be adequately treated, perhaps without the appearance of partisanship, certainly without the risk of striking once and again the note of controversy.

It is a platitude to say that the nineteenth century in England was, in the intellectual sphere, an age of great personalities. It may, from that point of view, challenge comparison with any

of its predecessors. But I will begin with saying something of the life-work of two men who are, in these days, among the less well known, but both of whom were pioneers and indeed crusaders in the social and industrial domain—Robert Owen and William Cobbett.

Owen's character and career are a bundle of paradoxes. At his famous factory at New Lanark, which became one of the show places of Europe and was visited, amongst others, by the Grand Duke Nicholas, afterwards Czar of Russia, he combined philanthropy with profit-making. The foundation of his creed which lay at the root of all his schemes for the reform of Society

was that "Man's character is made for him and not by him." That may seem to us a one-sided and unimaginative formula; for it appears to ignore the truth that, among the governing factors which mould both character and intelligence, is the spontaneous—often incalculable—personality (whether original or inherited) of the human subject of all social and educational experiments. Owen may be described as an Idealist, but the Utilitarians (or most of them), with whom he had little in common, were often the victims of a like shortness of vision. Whatever may have been the theoretical deficiencies of his creed, it was accompanied by a clear and almost prophetic insight into not

a few of the practical problems among which the statesmen and economists of his day were fumbling and stumbling their way. His once famous "New View of Society," published in 1816, is one of the most remarkable documents in political and economic literature. It is not too much to say that in it he anticipates almost all the great social and industrial reforms of the next one hundred years, and some which we are still only on the way to accomplishing. Here by way of example are a few of them.

(1) Universal uniform unsectarian system of schools with training colleges for teachers.

(2) Establishment of a Labour Depart-

ment, which should publish each quarter conditions of labour unemployment and wages in every district.

(3) Restriction of hours of adult labour, and prohibition of employment of children.

(4) To deal with labour left unemployed by private enterprise by useful works such as road-making.

(5) Drastic revision of Poor Law.

(6) Prison Reform: Owen constantly visited the gaols, and was as zealous as Mrs. Fry herself to put an end to their abuses.

(7) Reduction of number of licences for sale of drink, and increase of duties on spirits.

(8) More vaguely adumbrated, abolition of religious intolerance and war.

This by no means exhausts the catalogue: but it is true to say that in all the essentials of educational and factory reform Owen led the way, which was afterwards trodden to so much purpose by Sadler and Shaftesbury.

He eschewed party politics; he was never like Cobbett put in gaol; but kept on good terms with the Governments of the day. Indeed, unlike most prophets, he had a large measure of appreciation and honour during most of his time not only in his own country, but abroad. He was an excellent man of business, but wasted a substantial

part of his life in organizing leagues and associations, and in engineering colossal experiments, most of which came to nothing. As late as the thirties, he called a meeting in London to inaugurate an "Association of all Classes of all Nations, to effect an entire change in the character and condition of the human race." Through all the countless phases of his fertile, scheme-making mind, he retained his ineradicable belief in the indefinite adaptability of human character and intelligence by external and more or less mechanical changes in its environment.

He was the most disinterested of men, with the imperturbable self-complacency which characterised most of the

nineteenth century pioneers, with little sense of proportion, totally devoid of humour, of almost infinite credulity, and with hardly any insight into character or judgment of men. Yet his was one of the finest personalities and most far-seeing minds of the New Age.

William Cobbett, a contemporary of Owen, who worked in some of the same fields, was a man of a widely different type. Of one of Owen's Utopian schemes —the formation on a vast scale of co-operative villages, self-contained and self-supporting, he spoke with contempt as a "new species of monkery," and the setting up of "communities of paupers." But divergent and even antipathetic as the men were in tem-

perament and outlook, they had two things in common; they were pioneers in free and independent thinking, and they found the starting point, the initial impulse, of their life-long campaigns in a profound sense of the misery (to use Mr. Cole's words in his admirable Biography of Cobbett) of "the unclassed peasants who had been torn from the land and flung into the factory." Cobbett, sprung himself from the peasantry, had no sympathy with schemes for the reconstruction of society. What he wanted was to revive or restore the old England, as he conceived it; not to mould and guide the new economic conditions of the industrialised England of the future.

"I want to see the poor men of England what the poor men of England were when I was born." He is often, and perhaps justly, described as the greatest master of plain home-spun English prose in literature. But his home-spun fabric is constantly relieved and lit up by caustic touches, incisive thrusts, vivid and coloured asides; and even his most reckless and irresponsible outbursts are suffused with the glow of living human sympathy. His "Rural Rides" is a book still well worth reading; in its own way it is a literary masterpiece; which is more than can be said of any of Owen's voluminous tracts. This was the instrument which made him, despite the ingrained con-

servatism of the yeoman which he never wholly cast off, the most potent personal force in England for the best part of a quarter of a century. He was more widely read by the people than any other living writer, and a mighty slinger of ink. Nothing can more aptly describe his actual contributions to the emancipation of the common people than the following sentences of his biographer:

"In the building up of the new working class movements which he did not profess to understand Cobbett played nevertheless a vitally important part. . . . More than any other man he taught the workers to think for themselves, and to address their minds with courage

and with hope to the solution of their own problems."

The gulf between these two remarkable men was, despite an unacknowledged kinship of purpose, unbridgeable. In religion, for instance, Owen was in the most active years of his life what would now be called an Agnostic. Cobbett, on the other hand, started by being a convinced and attached member of the Established Church, and even when his faith in some of the tenets of orthodox theology had become somewhat unsettled, he continued to be a Churchman. He had an almost virulent hatred of Dissenters—his *bête noire* among them was the Methodists, whom he accused of concentrating men's

thoughts on the other world. In 1813 he denounced in his "Register" a Bill which had been brought in to relieve Unitarians of their legal disabilities. He had a constitutional dislike of Puritanism. The politician whom he hated and despised the most in the world, was the Evangelical Wilberforce, whose zeal for the emancipation of the blacks, coupled with his indifference and sometimes open opposition to measures to relieve the sufferings of his fellow-countrymen at home, seemed to Cobbett to be the ghastliest form of hypocrisy.

To take another illustration, there was nothing upon which Owen, from the time of his first establishment of the factory at New Lanark, was more

set than Education. He established there the first infant school in Great Britain. The school for the older children was called "The Institute for the Formation of Character." It was undoubtedly the best equipped and most ably managed institution of the kind in the country.

Cobbett had the most complete contempt for the whole principle and machinery of "public education" for the poor. He did not undervalue education in itself, but he regarded it as a family affair, between parents and children, and in his own household he practised what he preached. To anything in the nature of a system of national education (what he called

" organized book-drill ") he was resolutely opposed, upon what would now be regarded as frankly reactionary grounds. The following is a typical utterance.

" It is the lot of man, and most wisely has it been so ordained, that he shall live by the sweat of his brow. . . . Some are to labour with the mind, others with the limbs: and to suppose what is by Mr. Whitbread " (the then Whig leader in the House of Commons) " called education, necessary to those who labour with their limbs, is in my opinion as absurd as it would be to suppose that the being able to mow and reap are necessary to a Minister of State or an Astronomer."

Cobbett, in fact, was not an idealist; in his early years the French Revolution and its watchwords excited in him nothing but repugnance; he had no place in his propaganda for Malthus or the Utilitarians; he had no wish to take part in planning and building "a new Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land." Still less was there anything cosmopolitan in his outlook. He hated and denounced the abuses which he saw around him: political corruption, stock jobbing, the slavery of the new industrialism, "child murder by slow torture," the growing power of a soulless plutocracy, the divorce of the English peasant from the soil which was his heritage. He was as self-confident

and complacent as Owen himself. But he was not selfish; his genius was combative, not constructive; and there has been no doughtier or more indomitable champion in our history of the cause of the poor and the oppressed.

Let me turn now to quite a different sphere of intellectual activity, in which, more conspicuously perhaps than in any other department, the nineteenth century displays the emancipating power of free thinking. It is no exaggeration to say that the physical world as we know it to-day would have been all but unrecognizable to the thinkers and observers of one hundred and fifty years ago. By the ceaseless efforts of speculation and experiment nature has

been compelled to disclose, one after another, her long hidden secrets. Geology, biology, chemistry, physics, sometimes isolated, sometimes in combination, have completely transformed men's conception of the universe. It is not necessary to say anything to-day of the practical applications of the new knowledge, constructive and destructive, to the arts of peace and war. But such elementary terms as Life, Force, Matter, the Atom, have acquired a totally new significance. Science, like theology, is apt, unless it is carefully looked after, to lapse into dogmatism; and one of the most interesting and instructive lessons in this chapter in the annals of free thought is the warning

it gives us against the too facile assumption of finality. No greater misfortune ever happened in the history of our vocabulary, than that the same word, *Law*, should be used to designate the command of a sovereign authority and the generalizations of a Newton or a Darwin. It is perhaps lucky that men of science have not at their disposal (as Churchmen used to have) the apparatus of excommunication and inquisition: witness the treatment which was meted out to one of the most brilliant and original thinkers of our time—I agree also in some ways, one of the most perverse—Samuel Butler, by some of the hierophants of Evolution. There is, I believe, a growing disposition in

these days to admit the provisional character of the certainty of many of the so-called natural laws. Even the Ether itself, which has such a dominating place in the conceptions and theories of modern physics—*jolie hypothèse, qui explique tant de choses*—is, I understand, in some quarters coming under suspicion.

To the long procession of men of imagination and research who in the last century disclosed to us a new world, England contributed at least her share of the most conspicuous figures. It is only necessary to mention the names (among discoverers) of Young, Faraday, Lyell, Kelvin, Clerk Maxwell, and Darwin, and (among brilliant exposi-

tors and dialecticians) of Huxley and Clifford. But I am going to ask your attention, for a few moments, to one who worked in a small and secluded corner of the field, and has been awarded a less important place than he deserves.

Malthus's "Essay on the Principle of Population"—an economic treatise which, in our literature, comes next in importance to Adam Smith's "Wealth of Nations"—was first published in 1798, but in the enlarged and improved form in which it is generally known it appeared in 1803, and therefore belongs in date to the nineteenth century.

Malthus was educated at a Unitarian academy in Warrington, went thence

to Jesus College, Cambridge, where he was a contemporary of Coleridge, became a Fellow, took orders in the Church of England, and for the rest of his life was a professor at the East India College at Haileybury. His main doctrine is familiar to everyone—that population tends to increase faster than the means of subsistence, and is only kept down by positive and preventive checks—starvation, vice, misery and moral and prudential restraint. He was the first writer to introduce scientific method into political economy. He was careful and industrious in his exploration and collection of facts, and it is upon facts that all his arguments are based. This is his great merit. He

dealt a death blow to the romantic school of Rousseau and his followers with their dream of "equality" in a state of nature. Its central figure was the "natural man," who was supposed in a golden age to have entered into a social compact with his fellow savages, under which all went well, until Kings and Priests intruded upon the scene, and undermined and upset the régime of primæval equality. Such a state, as Malthus shows, if it ever existed, must have led to scarcity and degeneration. The fundamental institutions of the social organization—marriage, the family-property, the State—are not to be regarded as artificial restraints, imposed by force or fraud on the free develop-

ment of the natural man. They are on the contrary proved by experience to be the essential and indispensable conditions of manhood and of freedom. Malthus became a favourite writer with the Utilitarians, whose "economic man" was, however, also a historical figment, which has, in fact, never existed: an abstraction, treated as though, either spontaneously, or under modifications externally produced by education and law, he was capable of working out individually his own salvation. It is for his methods rather than for any of his specific theories—the rate of increase in population and food, and the rest—that Malthus deserves a high rank in the history of thought.

Malthus, who was himself the most amiable and placable of men, aroused the bitterest hostility among his contemporaries in the most diverse quarters. He was hated and despised by Cobbett, who was wont to speak of him contemptuously as "Parson Malthus," the apostle of vice and misery. He had (as Leslie Stephen points out) one of the blackest pages in the black books both of the Sentimental Tories and the Sentimental Radicals. Southey, a spokesman of the one class, was never tired of denouncing him as a fatalist, a materialist, and an anarchist, whose only remedy for the evils of society was to abolish the poor law, and starve the poor into celibacy. Hazlitt, who belonged to the

other class, is equally vehement and more scurrilous: the famous Essay shows (he declares) "the little, low, rankling malice of a parish beadle disguised in the garb of philosophy." But few writers of his time have had a more abiding influence.

To give one illustration only of the effect which, in time, his work produced upon the master minds in other departments of Science, it is sufficient to cite a well-known passage from the Autobiography of Charles Darwin:

"In October 1838," he writes, "that is fifteen months after I had begun my systematic inquiry—I happened to read for amusement 'Malthus on Population.' Being well prepared to appre-

ciate the struggle for existence which everywhere goes on, from long continued observation of the habits of animals and plants, it at once struck me that under these circumstances favourable variations would tend to be preserved and unfavourable ones to be destroyed. The result of this would be the formation of new species. Here then I had at last got a theory by which to work." And in a letter to Haeckel in 1864—quoted by Dr. Merz in his monumental "History of Scientific Thought in the Nineteenth Century"—Darwin writes, that for years he could not comprehend how any form should be so eminently adapted to its special conditions of life, but that "when through

good fortune Malthus' book came into my hands, the idea of natural selection came into my mind." As I have pointed out elsewhere,[1] the laws of heredity and of variation are still to be discovered. "Natural Selection" assumes the existence of an overcrowded and competitive world; it is indeed what Malthus would have called a "positive check" in what he himself (anticipating Darwin and Wallace) describes as the "struggle for existence"; and incidentally it brings about the result that (in the phraseology of Herbert Spencer) the "fittest," i.e., the physically fittest, "survive." Natural selec-

[1] Romanes Lecture: delivered before the University of Oxford, 1918.

tion therefore is not a cause but one of the consequences of " variation." That does not in any way affect the importance of Darwin's researches and his main conclusions. But it is interesting to remember that by his own acknowledgment those researches were guided and rendered fruitful by a principle already laid down in the purely economic domain; a notable example of the correlation and interdependence of free thought.

If time permitted I should have been glad to note the vivid and ineffaceable traces which the free and ubiquitous activity of the mind in the nineteenth century has left upon the best English poetry of the time: to some extent upon

Tennyson, and in a more marked degree upon Robert Browning and Matthew Arnold. But that would be an inexhaustible theme which calls for the powers of insight and exposition of a man like my friend Sir A. Quiller Couch.

We are not sufficiently removed in time from the nineteenth century to take stock of its gains and losses on the purely intellectual side. There was a tendency among the Victorians to disparage and belittle the eighteenth century, which is now perhaps coming into its own again. I think it is the younger Pitt who is reported to have said of Butler's Analogy that it raised as many doubts in his mind as it settled.

There are intellectual pessimists who hold that thought moves in a cycle, and that here, as in the life of the animal kingdom, there is evolution without progress. That is what may be called the Nihilist view, nowhere more tersely expressed than in a famous epigram in the Greek Anthology:—

πάντα γέλως καὶ πάντα κόνις καὶ πάντα τὸ μηδέν·
πάντα γὰρ ἐξ ἀλόγων ἐστὶ τὰ γιγνόμενα

thus rendered by Mr. Mackail:—

"All is laughter, and all is dust, and all is nothing,
For out of unreason is all that is."

—a sombre commentary (if it were true) upon the efforts and sacrifices of life, which probably haunts the minds of the men of action more often than the

minds of the men of thought. But it is not true. It is the fact that men go on generation after generation, asking the questions: What is Truth ? What is Faith ? And though what is believed to be true by one generation often appears to another to be unproved or even incredible, yet the search for Truth continues to be the most imperious, as well as the most stimulating, of our intellectual needs, and the belief that it can be found lies at the back, and brings into play the activities, even of the most sceptical minds. It is that, which, added to the power of initiative and self-development, differentiates man, whatever may be his physical pedigree, from the animal world. His

real progress is to be measured, not so much by visible advances and tangible results in the acquisition and application of knowledge, as in the degree to which, both in individuals and communities, he is increasingly ardent and disinterested in pursuing the quest after truth. Vigilance is the price which we have to pay for liberty; but so long as thought and speech are free, the text, which Bacon took for his motto, will continue to be verified by the experience of mankind:—

Multi pertransibunt et augebitur Scientia.

GTU Library
2400 Ridge Road
Berkeley, CA 94709
(510) 649-2500

GTU LIBRARY
3 2400 00569 8018

RECENT ESS

THE MORAL BASIS OF the Rt. Hon. Viscount Cecil, K.C. Preface and Appendix by S. H. Mellone, M.A., D.Sc. 62 pp. Paper Covers, 1s. net; Cloth, 2s. net.

A simple and forcible statement of the fundamental principles. The Appendix tells the story of the League down to the momentous Fourth Assembly, Geneva, 1923.

THE LOST RADIANCE OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION. By L. P. Jacks, M.A., LL.D. Second edition. 45 pp. Stiff covers, 1s. 3d. net.

"On the whole it is probably the finest utterance that the well-known editor of the *Hibbert Journal* has yet delivered."—*Christian World.*

ORTHODOXY. By the Rt. Hon. H. A. L. Fisher. Cloth, 1s. 6d. net; stiff covers, 1s. net.

"Touches on several large themes, especially on the influence of modern science upon religious creeds and on the doctrine of progress."—*Spectator.*

CHRISTIANITY APPLIED TO THE LIFE OF MAN AND OF NATIONS. By Charles Gore, D.D., LL.D. 51 pp. Cloth, 2s. net.

"Everything that Dr. Gore writes is of course suggestive and worthy of close attention, and this lecture should be widely read."—*Westminster Gazette.*

THE PLACE OF JUDAISM AMONG THE RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD. By Claude G. Montefiore, M.A. 61 pp. Cloth, 1s. 6d. net.

"One would have to go a long way to find a more admirably succinct and altogether illuminating statement of the present mission of Judaism as it is conceived by its own best teachers and leaders."—*Christian Register.*

HERESY: ITS ANCIENT WRONGS AND MODERN RIGHTS IN THESE KINGDOMS. By Alexander Gordon, M.A. 88 pp. Cloth, 1s. 6d. net.

"Though Mr. Gordon's pages are packed almost to overflowing with facts which he has rescued from obscurity, his narrative is by no means lacking in personal colour. The appendix of notes, extending to thirty pages, reveals the range of scholarship in almost forgotten fields which has gone to the making of the sparkling narrative of his lecture."—*Manchester Guardian.*

THE LINDSEY PRESS, 5 ESSEX STREET, LONDON, W.C. 2

THE PRICE OF PROGRESS

AND OTHER ESSAYS

By S. H. MELLONE, M.A., D.Sc.

Demy 8vo. 200 *pp.* 7*s.* 6*d. net.*

CONTENTS :—(1) The Price of Progress. (2) Is Evil Necessary? (3) Does God Answer Prayer? (4) Athanasius the Modernist. (5) The Catholicism of John Henry Newman. (6) The Unitarianism of James Martineau. (7) Symbolism in Religious Experience.

"Dr. Mellone has been well known for the last twenty-five years as an outstanding scholar in the realms of psychology and Christian doctrine. It should be added that the work gains considerably from the very fine format of the Lindsey Press."—*The Aberdeen Press.*

"In every way worthy of the author's high reputation."—*The Inquirer.*

"A valuable contribution to the religious thought of our time."—*The Sheffield Independent.*

"Full of suggestive thought."—*The Times Literary Supplement.*

"Excellent examples of the author's power of brilliant characterization and critical exposition."—*Vox Studentium.*

THE LINDSEY PRESS, 5 ESSEX STREET, LONDON, W.C. 2.